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ABSTRACT

The problem of dropouts among special education students is summarized. After a brief overview of the problem, various studies are cited indicating a substantially higher incidence of dropping out of high school prior to program completion for handicapped than for non-handicapped students. Implications and recommendations for educational policy and practice are then considered. Among these are the need for early identification of dropout-prone students so that positive intervention can be implemented; the need for using information on factors leading to dropping out in remedial programming and counseling; and the need to reevaluate the effectiveness of individualized education programs for mildly handicapped students. Also provided is a bibliography of 19 additional resources. (DB)

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SPECIAL EDUCATION DROPOUTS

Overview

Since the passage of Public Law 94–142, the provision of appropriate educational services remains problematic for a substantial number of students with handicaps. Students with a history of inadequate educational preparation are more seriously handicapped as they "age-out" of school because of their dependence on society and their uncertain future in the job market (Halpern, 1973; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug & Horiuchi, 1983; Wehman, Kregel, & Zoller, 1984). For high school students identified as handicapped, the education program is often inadequate. Efforts to mainstream secondary level students with disabilities vary widely as do levels of support. Issues regarding integration remain "soft spots" in the policies and practices of many schools. It is, for this reason, in part, that high schools have the reputation of being ill-defined concerning their purpose and seriously disjointed in their ability to implement programs to serve the student with handicaps (Catalano, 1986; Howe, 1984).

Population

Numerous citations in the literature depict the typical dropout as a person with a wide range of learning problems (Beck & Muia, 1980). Despite the recent growth of literature concerning high school dropouts, only a handful of studies have focused on the higher than average incidence of dropping out among students with handicapping conditions (Edgar, 1987; Hasazi et al., 1985; Hippolitus, 1980; Levin, Zigmond, & Birch, 1985; Lichtenstein, 1987; Plisko & Stern, 1985; St. Paul School District, 1981). The Eighth Annual Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 1986) suggests that although many youths with handicaps may graduate from school systems beginning at the age of 17 ". . . many others exit prior to the completion of the secondary program (p. 14)." To further investigate this phenomenon, state education programs are now required to collect data on the number of youths with handicaps who exit prior to graduation as well as the reason for exiting.

Recent state and local follow-up studies confirm this unexplainable attrition rate among students with handicaps. These studies also strongly suggest that the dropout rate among students receiving special education services significantly exceeds the dropout rate among the general school-age population.

The St. Paul Public Schools conducted a retrospective examination of the records of 4,500 students in attendance between 1974 and 1977 who left school prior to graduation. They found that up to 80% of the youths who dropped out may have been eligible for special education services. Hippolitus (1980) cited the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped as documenting the dropout rate for special education students at five to six times the rate of youths without handicaps.

Findings of the second follow-up study—*High School and Beyond*, a national longitudinal study—report higher dropout rates for students with mild to borderline handicaps than for nonhandicapped students (19% vs. 14%, respectively) (Plisko & Stern, 1985). (*High School and Beyond* dropout rates must be considered conservative estimates due to the timing of the survey.) The dropout rate for specific handicapping conditions ranges from a low of approximately 19% for students with orthopedic impairments to a high of 37% for students with learning disabilities (Lichtenstein, 1987). Hasazi and her colleagues in Vermont (1985) report that 28% of a random sample of high school special education students left school before age 18, and an additional 13% left after age 18 without their diploma. Additionally, Levin et al. (1985) found that the dropout rate for students in Pittsburgh with learning disabilities approached 51% which far exceeded the 36% reported for the general population during this period. The New Hampshire Special Education Information System (SPEDIS) revealed a differentiated pattern of attrition among students with specific handicaps, ages 15–21 (Lichtenstein, 1988). Students identified as having an emotional handicap dropped out at a rate of 57%, while students classified as learning disabled left at a rate of 40%. Students with hearing and speech impairments had an attrition rate of 38.5% and 36.4%, respectively. Among all students with handicaps the rate was reported at 40%. A study conducted recently in California (Jay & Padilla, 1987) found a wide variation in dropout rates for different disability groups, and also by the severity of a student's disability within the group.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of these findings have special significance for educational policy and practice. More systematic procedures for identifying potential dropouts and better follow-through in providing comprehensive programs that retain students with handicaps in school must be addressed.

Previous studies show that dropout-prone students need to be identified early enough in their school careers so some form(s) of positive intervention can be initiated before students enter high school (Novak & Dougherty, 1979; Weber, 1986). For the issue of dropping out as a whole, Weber suggests a more systematic approach to identifying potential dropouts long before entry into high school. Additionally, it is suggested that more specialized guidance and counseling services be available to these students (a) prior to their entry into high school, (b) at the point of entry into high schools, and (c) continually throughout their high school careers.

In addition, educators should be made aware of the factors which might lead students to drop out. Rarely is such information collected and systematically used for remedial programming and counseling. For special educators, it is imperative to realize that students who are mildly handicapped and capable of being mainstreamed are at greatest risk of dropping out, especially those identified as learning disabled, mentally retarded, emotionally handicapped, and hearing, speech, and health impaired.

Further distinctions have been reported recently by Edgar (1987), who suggests that students with more severe handicaps ". . . tend to be captives of the system" (p. 557). This differentiation between those with mild handicaps and others with severe disabilities appears to be substantiated by the New Hampshire study which suggests that students with multiple handicaps who are predominantly educated in self-contained classrooms are much less likely to drop out than their nonhandicapped and mildly handicapped peers (Lichtenstein, 1988). Based on these findings it may be necessary to reevaluate the effectiveness of IEPs, the IEP planning process, and the degree to which special education can effectively provide individualized attention in the least restric-

EC 202834

tive environment. The early introduction of goals and objectives that address methods of student retention and transition-related services appears justifiable.

Additional attention must be given to other aspects of the problem. Wehlage and Rutter (1984) argue that the focus of new research should be directed towards studying the "institutional character of school and how this affects the potential dropout" (p. 376). Such policies and practices may have some relationship to the quality of special services offered to youths with handicaps.

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